



What is witchcraft? Various terms and interpretations have been offered in attempts to understand the phenomenon of witchcraft in Africa.

E. Evans-Pritchard's classic distinction between witchcraft and sorcery, which has been altered by other anthropologists, is relevant in many places in Africa. The assumption is that witchcraft is an inherent quality and a psychic act. The witch performs no rites, utters spells, and possesses "medicine." Sorcery, according to Evans-Pritchard, is the deliberate employment of magic rites, the use of spell or mechanical aids in the attempt to bring a result. It can be used either for a good or an evil purpose.

Others, however, have attempted to amalgamate the two in one term. Middleton and Winter, for example, combine the two in the term "wizardry." Mary Douglas' use of the term "sorcery," significantly, includes witchcraft. The problems with these terms are that often they do not work when applied to societies other than those researched, and sometimes they fail to be relevant some years after the research was carried out. Consequently, there is a constant struggle for terms to identify these phenomena, which also means that the meaning of witchcraft will depend upon the place in which the conversation is held.

### **Bayie, for Good or for Bad: An Akan Perspective**

The fear of witchcraft (*bayie*) has deep roots in the socio-historical psyche of the Akan people of Ghana. Many Akan Christians and theologians continue to seek protection from it. Yet while the Akan think that witchcraft is often used for evil, they also believe that it can be used for good. This belief is mirrored in all aspects of society, including music, films, and day-to-day activities of the Akan. For

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instance, the term *bayie* (witchcraft) is used to describe a genius who performs an extraordinary feat in any field or profession. Opoku-Afriyie, a Ghanaian footballer, won the nickname *bayie* for his special ability to score goals from obscure angles. The Akan often explain the

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advanced societies' ability to invent, in life, as the good use of witchcraft. From this background, J.B. Crensil, an Akan musician, sings that if you have witchcraft, use it for something good; the white man, after all, has used his to invent airplanes and trains. Thus while the Akan see witchcraft as something evil, they also see it as something that can be used for a good purpose.

This paradox is pictured in the etymology of the word *bayie* (witchcraft). Some people present the derivation of *bayie* (witchcraft) as from *ɔba* (child) and *yi* (to take away?). Thus, here, *bayie* (witchcraft) conveys the idea of the person who takes away a child or kills a child. Nevertheless, Osofo Komfo Damuah, a Roman Catholic priest who resigned from the Catholic Church to establish the Afrikania Mission (a sect that was a mixture of Christianity and traditional religion), derives *bayie* from *ɔbae* (came) and *yie* (well or good). He portrays witchcraft as an inherent potency internalized in some fortunate human beings as part of their personality. Thus Damuah sees witchcraft as something good.

It can be deduced from the discussion so far that the Akan concept of witchcraft is the belief that some people may possess supernatural powers, which may be used for either good or evil. The person who is possessed by *bayie* is called *ɔbayifo* (a witch) or *ayen* (Fanti). The male witch is sometimes called *benbonsam* (literally, "the man who is evil").

### Witchcraft, the Supernatural, and God

Some people relate witchcraft to other supernatural powers such as fetishes or charms. However, from an Akan's perspective, witchcraft is not fetishes or charm (*suman* or *aduro*). Fetish is prepared by a traditional priest or sorcerer to protect people. But witchcraft is not prepared by a priest to be given to an individual. It is considered spiritual and not given in such a visible manner. It is considered an inherent potency, thought by some as given by God.

Witchcraft is similar to spirit-possession, but the two are said to be distinct phenomena. They are similar because both are supposed to have supernatural powers and are thought to be controlled by certain spirits to perform certain actions. They are different in the sense that in witchcraft the *ahoboa* (witch-spirit animal) is thought to cohort with a person in a symbiotic marriage, while in spirit-possession a person is said to be a vehicle, whose body serves as a receptacle for a spirit entity, who controls the person for brief intervals and then vacates. The difference is heightened by the fact that while so-called witches are socially abhorred and despised in society, spirit-possessed persons (*akomfo*) are well respected. This stems from the notion that the functions of those who are possessed by the gods are thought to help the community by the giving of divination and the knowledge of herbal medicines. Thus while a spirit-possession phenomenon is a public affair, witchcraft is a concealed (or nocturnal) activity.

Witchcraft is often directly connected with dreams but is different from dreams. Dreams have important roles to play in the life of the Akan. The derivation of the Akan expression for dream, *so dae* is illuminative; *so* means "to carry," and *da* means "to sleep." The expression means "to carry something into sleep." Consequently many dreamers seek the help of others for interpretation.

Many self-confessed witches and those accused of witchcraft base their evidences on dreams. In most witchcraft-related interviews that I have conducted, the interviewees relate their experiences to dreams. One person even began his story "of how [he] became a victim of witchcraft." He went on: "These have been revealed to me in dreams." In fact, many people who are accused of witchcraft often admit to being witches on the assumption that they probably committed the alleged crime in their dreams. Dreams are perceived as spiritual channels for understanding physical happenings. Yet, despite the relationship between dreams and witchcraft, they are held to be two different experiences.

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